

Trainee meeting focuses on workforce trends

By Eddy Ball

As the annual general meeting of the [NIEHS Trainees Assembly \(NTA\)](#) May 10 underscored, career development is more important than ever in today's market, as budget cuts and trends in the biomedical workforce are bringing changes to the training and career experience.

The meeting opened with a short presentation by NTA Steering Committee Co-chair [Anne Marie Jukic, Ph.D.](#), on big-picture trends in the biomedical workforce that reinforced the title of her first slide, "Why you should care."

The program moved seamlessly into the featured presentation by NIEHS Scientific Director [Darryl Zeldin, M.D.](#), on the Institute's budget for the remainder of fiscal year (FY) 2013 and projections for FY 2014 that directly impact the NIH biomedical workforce. "There's no way to sugarcoat [these developments]," Zeldin told the audience. "There's really no good news here.... [But] fortunately, we planned ahead."

Following Zeldin's talk was a presentation by NIEHS Division of Extramural Research and Training Program Administrator [Michael Humble, Ph.D.](#), on changes to an important NIH grant mechanism, known as [K99/R00](#), (<http://grants.nih.gov/grants/guide/notice-files/NOT-OD-13-050.html>) that provides generous mentoring and early career support for trainees who are successful with their applications. Two trainees received K99 awards this year — one from the Mitochondrial DNA Replication Group and one from the Chromosome Stability Group.

Concluding the program, Director of the NIEHS Office of Fellows' Career Development (OFCD) [Tammy Collins, Ph.D.](#), outlined career development workshops and classes scheduled for the upcoming academic year.

Looking at disconcerting trends at NIEHS and nationwide

Jukic's slides highlighted two trends in the biomedical workforce. The first showed a growth in the number of scientists with doctoral degrees, which nearly doubled from 2009 to 2011. The second offered estimates of the percentage of jobs closely related to training, which fell from almost 71 percent to just over 59 percent during the same period.

According to Jukic, those figures translate into a compelling argument for trainees to develop a complementary skill set, with communications at the top of the list, to empower them in both traditional and off-the-bench employment.

Zeldin's figures on employment at NIEHS, which mirror trends at other institutes and centers, were also grim. But unlike workforce trends, over which NIEHS leadership had no real control, Zeldin and other senior officials at NIEHS were able to plan in advance, so that most of the Institute's budget cuts have been absorbed through attrition and spending freezes. The number of lead researchers has dropped by nearly 25 percent since 2008, he said, and the number of trainees is down by more than 30 percent.

Looking back, philosophically, on the ebb and flow of the biomedical workforce in past decades, Zeldin said, he was cautiously optimistic about the long term. "Ultimately, things will be better."



Even before his appointment in October 2011, Zeldin was aware of the need to prepare for anticipated cuts. His response to the possibility of fiscal restraint is a major reason why there have been no layoffs in the Division of Intramural Research, which, like other NIEHS divisions, now has to do its job with diminished resources. (Photo courtesy of Steve McCaw)



With his sobering report on the NIEHS budget, Zeldin had the undivided attention of the trainees. While the meeting was well attended, the turnout reflected the reduction in the number of trainees currently at NIEHS. (Photo courtesy of Steve McCaw)



Jukic, right, joined Zeldin for questions from the audience. Their presentations reinforced the message that trainees need to take control of their career development, as early as possible in the training cycle. NTA Steering Committee Co-chair [Rachel Goldsmith, Ph.D.](#), joined other presenters in the front row. (Photo courtesy of Steve McCaw)

(Re)visioning the training experience

Following Humble's presentation (see [text box](#)), Collins returned to Jukic's theme of developing additional skill sets to complement training in the lab.

Along with a broad range of NTA resources, such as the annual Biomedical Career Fair (see [story](#)), and internship experiences in communications and outreach teaching, OFCD organized 11 workshops over the 2012-2013 academic year for helping trainees grow their career development skill set, with training in grantsmanship, management, and other areas, including an upcoming event June 7 on interviewing and negotiating. Collins encouraged trainees to take advantage of the NIEHS LinkedIn group and regular opportunities for career advising by the NIH Career Counseling Center.

Collins told trainees to expect a comprehensive survey in their email boxes and urged them to let her know what else they need in the area of career development. As she talked about her commitment to make sure NIEHS trainees benefit from resources available through the NIH [Office of Intramural Training and Education](https://www.training.nih.gov/) (<https://www.training.nih.gov/>) in Bethesda, Md., Collins also encouraged the audience to craft individual development plans, as early as possible during their time at NIEHS, taking advantage of resources at <http://myidp.sciencecareers.org>. (<http://myidp.sciencecareers.org/>)



Humble urged trainees trying for K99/R00 mentoring and early career support to start looking two years out, and apply early enough to take advantage of opportunities for revising their applications. (Photo courtesy of Steve McCaw)



The presentations were especially relevant for senior trainees, such as Jim Aloor, Ph.D., left, who are getting closer to their transitions into employment. (Photo courtesy of Steve McCaw)



Collins listened as people asked questions. She was prepared with a variety of career development opportunities, to help trainees prepare to enter the changing biomedical workforce. (Photo courtesy of Steve McCaw)

Early career support grants – changes in timing and provisions

Humble opened his report on upcoming changes to the K99/R00 grant program, with a reference to the NIH Advisory Committee to the Director [Biomedical Workforce Task Force](http://acd.od.nih.gov/bwf.htm) (<http://acd.od.nih.gov/bwf.htm>) report. Noting that the time to degree, and time to first grant, had increased for trainees over the years, Humble posed the question on the minds of many who have looked at workforce trends. “How can we speed up the training process?”

One way, it turns out, is to implement a change in the eligibility application window, which will be effective in February 2014. At that time, the eligibility for applying will be limited to four years of training, rather than five.

This change in timing is important, Humble explained, because the new K99 provisions require no fewer than 12 months of mentored training and career development, prior to award of early-career research support, the R00 portion of the award. Applicants who fail to complete the year of mentored training and career development will sacrifice the R00 part of the coveted award.

“The idea is to get the award to you earlier,” Humble said. He added that administrators are aiming for a 30 percent success rate under the new provisions. He also reminded the audience that the K99/R00 program awards grants to trainees who are noncitizens as well as citizens.

Zeldin reminded attendees that a new NIEHS program, initiated last year, rewards trainees with a \$2,000 merit increase to their training stipend for a successful K99/R00 application (see [story](#)), and gives their lead researchers an additional training position in their labs.

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